

Turkey and the European Union: 2014 and Beyond

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ABSTRACT *It seems likely that in 2013 Turkey and the EU will restart technical negotiations on one or more chapters. A real breakthrough, however, can only be expected in 2014, after the German elections and after the EU has regained the confidence that the current euro crisis can be overcome. Turkey for its part first needs to successfully conclude the fundamental reforms it has started on the Kurdish problem and in writing a new constitution. Revitalized accession negotiations after 2014 will be further complicated by the debate on a new EU architecture that should reflect the growing divergence between a further integrated euro zone and those member states that wish to keep their national currency. When and if the EU decides to reconfigure itself into an organization that operates with different speeds, Turkey will have a better chance of being accepted as a member.*

After two years of growing frustration on the Turkish side with a total lack of progress in its EU accession negotiations and the sheer lack of interest on the part of key EU players, 2013 seems to be the year in which Turkey can at least make some modest steps forward again. After France announced it was willing to unblock one of the five chapters (regional policy) that were declared untouchable by then President Nicolas Sarkozy, the technical part of the accession process can be resumed. The French decision is symbolically important for two reasons: It shows that, unlike his predecessor, President Francois Hollande is not a committed, ideologi-

cally inspired opponent of Turkish EU membership. Besides, restarting the official talks between Turkish and European bureaucrats on a new and quite challenging chapter will end, at least for the foreseeable future, the speculation that when faced with an ongoing impasse it was time to stop the entire project.

During her visit to Turkey in February, the restart got the blessing of German Chancellor Angela Merkel who stressed, once again, that, although personally she is still not in favor of Turkey's full membership, the accession negotiations should be continued. On top of that, there are indications that maybe in the course

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 15 / No. 2 /
2013, pp. 47-55

of this year a second, previously frozen chapter could be opened as a result of new French flexibility or a change in Cypriot calculations.

For the moment, the impact of the election of Nicos Anastasiades to the Cypriot presidency on Turkey's EU path is hard to determine. On the one hand, Anastasiades did support the Annan plan for the reunification of the island in 2004 (as did the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey),

at all in the mood to make substantial concessions.

Still, under somewhat veiled pressure from the EU (for instance as an undeclared part of the financial rescue operation), Anastasiades might be willing to lift the Cypriot veto on the energy chapter, a crucial element in future Turkey-EU relations and, moreover, a move that could bring some relief to the growing tensions between Cyprus and Turkey about the exploitation of the recently found gas reserves off the shore of the divided island.

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A Shifting Balance

The opening of new chapters and the conciliatory speeches coming out of Paris, Berlin and maybe Nicosia are all indications of a shared feeling inside the EU, even among opponents of Turkish full membership, that it is better to keep the process going and see what happens in the future than to pull the plug now and break off negotiations. That would be difficult anyway on the EU side because to do so requires unanimity among member states, and with ongoing strong support for Turkey's accession in countries like the UK and Sweden that is not very likely to happen. Turkey itself could of course decide it has had enough of all the European foot dragging. It is true that in parts of the Turkish media and in many tea houses such a suggestion has been welcomed by frustrated Turks who believe that their country is doing fine outside the EU and

and it is also true the center-right politician is a strong supporter of eventual Cypriot membership of NATO, which can only happen if Turkey does not use its veto. On the other hand, the first priority of the new president will be to strike a deal with the EU on an aid package to prevent the island from going bankrupt. Only after that hurdle has been taken would he be able to dedicate some of his time to finding a creative way to overcome the stalemate in the reunification talks. In doing so, he, undoubtedly, will be aware of the fact that most Greek Cypriots, including his coalition partner, are not

don't want to be seen as beggars in front of a closed European door. But with so many other urgent and sensitive issues on its agenda, it does not seem very plausible that the Erdoğan government would want to rock the EU boat any time soon. Despite the occasional anti-EU rhetoric in Ankara, which has been full of anger and disappointment, the ruling party knows very well that cutting ties with the EU would have enormous and unforeseen consequences for the Turkish economy, domestic political balances and Turkey's standing in the region. The Turkish government also realizes that the current cautious rapprochement is a result of the awareness in European capitals that since the start of the negotiations in 2005, relations between Brussels and Turkey have changed quite dramatically in Turkey's favor: the EU is in much worse shape than it was eight years ago while Turkey has done very well, both economically and as an indispensable ally in the efforts of the US and Europe to deal with post-Arab Spring North Africa and the Middle East. Why spoil these gains by giving up on EU membership now?

The German Elections

For all these reasons, 2013 will be the year of some gradual but symbolically important improvements in relations between Turkey and the EU. A real breakthrough, meaning the opening of all blocked chapters by the EU after the unambiguous declaration of a new commitment to full membership at the end of the road by

both sides, will have to wait for 2014 or after.

Such a genuine restart can only happen after the German parliamentary elections scheduled for September of this year, and after the EU manages to outline a convincing plan that deals with the still unresolved effects of the euro crisis, taking into account the rise of popular resistance against the current dominant austerity policies.

With another six months to go, it is hard to predict the outcome of the German elections but it seems as if Angela Merkel will continue as chancellor. The only change will be her coalition partner: most probably the Social Democrats will replace the Liberals. That might have an effect on Germany's policy on Turkey's EU membership, but the change will not be revolutionary and it will take time for the new foreign minister to make his or her mark. From a Turkish perspective, a new Red-Green government in Berlin would definitively make a big difference, but the current opinion polls indicate that an end to the Merkel years is not very likely.

The Euro Crisis

It is even more difficult to forecast the outcome of the extremely complicated efforts inside the EU to come up with the right financial, economic and institutional answers to the problems facing the euro zone. In a recent speech, Olli Rehn, vice-president of the European Commission

and responsible for economic and monetary affairs and the euro, presented a sketch of the contours of the euro zone and the EU ten years on. According to the soft spoken but determined Finn, the EU will have to meet three main challenges. The first is to create sustainable growth and reverse the trend of European losses in global competitiveness. The second is fiscal sustainability, pushing back high public debts that have a negative impact on economic dynamism. Finally, the third and most immediate challenge is to rebuild the Economic

tioned policies (budget cuts, rising unemployment) and the loss of national sovereignty is on the rise. In addition, the EU is in danger of being split into countries in the north that are afraid they will have to pay the bill for their mainly Southern European colleagues that need EU help to survive economically.

Until there is some sort of consensus, across geographical and political borders, about a even-handed and fair package for all euro-zone members, the EU will not be in a position, neither mentally nor politically, to turn the page in its dealings with Turkey and enthusiastically welcome Turkey in its midst. My guess is that it will take at least till the end of 2014 before the EU will have put together a set of plans that is effective and has majority support. That might also produce the confidence and the political determination that is needed to make a substantial move in speeding up Turkey's EU accession process.

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and Monetary Union, the framework for the euro. That includes setting up a banking union and other mechanisms that will limit taxpayers' exposure to future problems in the banking system but will, inevitably, entail a further sharing of budgetary sovereignty by the member states of the EU.

It is an illusion to think that all these reforms will be accepted and implemented smoothly. In many EU countries the opposition to the short-term repercussions of the above men-

Visa Policy

Focusing on the possibilities and challenges of opening up new chapters in the technical negotiations should not distract us from the highly political core of the accession process. Most Europeans and Turks, including their elected representatives, do not base their opinion on Turkey's EU membership bid on the details of any particular chapter. Far more important are practical obstacles experienced by many, such as the



EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton (L) and Turkish Foreign Minister take their places for a press conference after the third Turkey-EU Ministerial Political Dialogue Meeting.

AFP / Bülent Kılıç

current visa regime or issues related to democracy, rule of law, minority rights and other topics covered by the Copenhagen criteria. In that sense, much could and should be done to prepare for a revitalization of the membership talks.

The single most discouraging practice that convinces Turks that, at the moment, the EU is not serious about membership are the humiliating procedures Turkish citizens who want to enter the Schengen zone or the UK for a short stay have to go through. Instead of stimulating person-to-person contact, academic exchanges or commercial cooperation, the cumbersome system discourages Turks from traveling to EU member states. In Turkish eyes, the EU added insult to injury when in recent years Brussels implemented a system of

visa-free travel for people from the Western Balkans. That is, from countries that have not even started the EU accession process.

But change might be under way. At the end of 2012, the European Commission initiated a similar procedure for Turkey, albeit full of conditions and without a clear deadline. The Brussels executive realizes that the Turkish accusation of double standards, although often misused to cover up Ankara's own responsibility for hiccups in the accession process, does make sense in the case of visas. Besides, pressure from European courts to change is mounting as well. Already in 2009, the European Court in Luxembourg ruled that obliging Turkish service providers to buy a visa is not compatible with the provisions of the 1963 Association

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Agreement between Turkey and the predecessor of the EU and the 1972 Additional Protocol. Dutch and German courts have since confirmed this view. Member states' governments are resisting the implications of these rulings but they know there are limits to their obstruction and one day the present visa regime will have to be abolished. Of course Turkey should deliver on its part of the proposed deal and ratify and implement the so-called Readmission Agreement with the EU that forces Turkey to take back all illegal migrants to the EU coming from or through Turkey.

For the moment there is deadlock because Turkey is afraid some EU member states will always block any visa liberalization, even if Turkey has done its bit. Still, as part of the general improvement in relations, this lack of trust could be overcome, and 2013 and 2014 might be the years in which many ordinary Turks will experience very concretely that their country is indeed getting closer to the EU.

Fundamental Reforms

But it is not only the EU that could create a more positive environment conducive for a comprehensive re-

start of the talks in 2014. In the spring of 2013 Turkey is right in the middle of two potentially ground breaking developments that could fundamentally change not only the domestic architecture of the country but also its relations with the EU: the efforts to solve the Kurdish problem through direct negotiations with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and the attempt in the Turkish parliament to write a new civilian constitution that is in line with European standards and practices.

If Turkey could manage to complete both processes successfully this year, the country would, all of a sudden, belong to those countries that have shown they are capable of solving long-standing problems in democratic and peaceful ways. Add to that the upcoming judicial reforms that will probably lead to a considerable decrease in the number of imprisoned journalists, academics, politicians and activists, and Turkey will be a different country in the beginning of 2014. It would be hard for the opponents of Turkey's EU membership to keep on arguing that the country is not ready or is not willing or able to further reform its institutional set-up or basic laws.

Many Uncertainties

I have been referring to some big ifs in describing a possible scenario for the next 12 months. Nobody knows the outcome of the German elections, the plans of Cypriot President Anastasiades or the flexibility of both the

EU and Turkey on the visa issue. It is even harder to produce a forecast of the outcome of the breath-taking domestic initiatives on the Kurdish problem and the constitution.

Add to all these uncertainties the extremely volatile situation in Syria where, for the moment, Turkey and the EU are trying to cooperate closely despite differences on how best to support the anti-Assad rebels, and the impossibility of predicting the repercussions of the Turkish presidential elections in August 2014 and the impact of a new AKP prime minister in the likely case of Erdoğan becoming president. The outcome of all these events and developments will determine whether 2014 will be like 2013, a year of modest improvement, or the year in which a fundamental restart will be made because the conditions on both sides are met.

A Two-speed EU

To make things even more unpredictable in the medium term, a fundamental debate has just started on how to reorganize the EU when it is faced with a growing gap between the majority of EU member states that has or will join the euro zone, and a minority (the UK and Denmark, at least for the moment) that does not aspire to do so. The exact outcome of that European soul searching is again hard to predict but it looks very likely that eventually the EU will be transformed into an organization that operates with two different speeds: a core of member states that share one

currency and are willing to integrate further, economically and politically, and a second tier of member states that wants to keep their own currency and is opposed to giving up sovereignty other than what is necessary for the proper functioning of the internal market. It seems the only way to keep the UK inside the EU, knowing that a large majority of Brits does not want to give up the pound, and, when asked, would vote against further integration with the rest of the EU. Some sort of associative EU membership might be the best option for the UK and all other European countries that want to be part of the EU but not of the integrated core.

This debate will take some time and nobody has found the perfect solution yet. Many questions are still unanswered: Will there be just two speeds or will there be a further differentiation or a so-called “variable geometry”, meaning member states can choose between several degrees of integration? If the euro is the basis for the core group, what do the countries of the second tier have in common, apart from the internal market? How will the institutional framework (for example the European Parliament and the European Commission) be arranged to deal with these different speeds? Can the EU still develop a common foreign and security policy when one of the leading countries in this field, the UK, is not a member of the integrated core?

A new EU treaty to regulate this two-speed EU seems inevitable but many

governments are afraid that asking their citizens' opinion on the new arrangements, either because their constitution obliges them to do so or because they are under growing pressure to open up European decision making to democratic scrutiny at the national level, will pave the way for increased support of the populist opponents of the EU. It's the main reason so many political leaders across the EU are reluctant these days to express themselves about the new EU architecture and instead try to present the necessary improvements to save the euro as only small adaptations of existing treaties. These efforts to reform the EU by stealth and without public debate or referenda has had, not surprisingly, the opposite effect because it fuels the suspicion among many European citizens that, once again, they will be excluded from important decisions in Europe that will influence their daily life in the decades to come.

All this matters to Turkey because the outcome of this debate will determine which kind of EU Turkey will be joining somewhere between 2020 and 2023, if and when of course the possible restart in 2014 is followed by years of successful legal alignment and democratic reforms in Turkey and by a gradual acceptance inside the EU that Turkey's membership will be beneficial for both partners.

Turkey and UK

Both Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül have repeatedly indi-

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cated that they want Turkey to copy the British example and keep the Turkish lira. If Turkey sticks to that position at the end of the negotiations that will automatically mean it will opt for the second, less integrated tier. Like the Brits, Turkey would then also not join the Schengen Agreement on free travel and might look for a similar list of opt-outs from other policy areas.

It seems logical that such a Turkish choice to keep its distance from the integrated euro core would make Turkish EU membership easier to accept for countries such as Germany, France and Austria that are and will remain part of that core. There might, however, be a problem of timing. Decisions on whichever reorganization of the EU will not be made before 2017, taking into account that an inescapable treaty revision could only happen after the establishment of a convention consisting of national and European politicians in 2015, and could only enter into force after a positive vote in several national referenda. As a result we may be talking

2017 or 2018. In the meantime, Turkey has to prepare for full membership in the EU as we know it today, including the obligation to accept the euro as the common currency. This poses all kind of transitional problems that can only be addressed with a willingness to compromise on both sides.

So while Turkey could be moving closer to the EU after 2014, the EU itself has become a moving target, albeit one that, eventually, seems easier to reach for a more democratic and prosperous Turkey that wishes to combine the benefits of EU membership with the flexibility it needs to operate in other parts of the world. ■



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